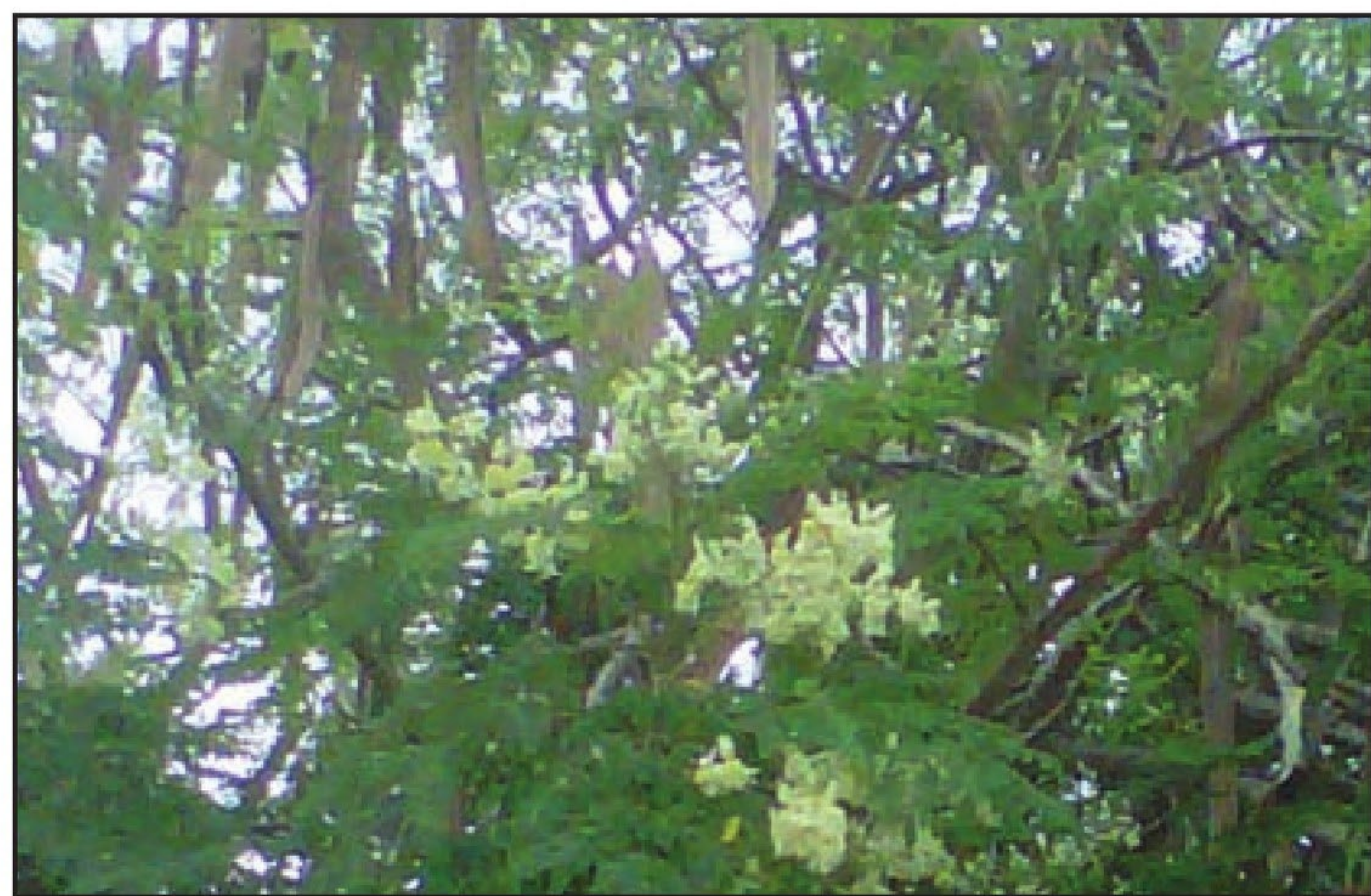


Health & Living

Re-introducing Merengue to Aruba



In countries such as Surinam, Guyana and Trinidad, a common belief was – and, perhaps, still is: “On Aruba money grows on trees.” I came to Aruba with this belief, but was soon disappointed to find that on Aruba money does grow but not on trees, but from hard work and sacrifice.

As time went by and I became knowledgeable about Aruban life, especially about its flora and fauna, it dawned on me that in Aruba money does, indeed, grow on trees, but not in the form of notes and coins, but in their equivalent – food and other life supports provided by the Sign tree. The sight of this tree growing wild and neglected amazed me because in Trinidad the tree was treasured for its food and other values. It ranked with spinach, okra, beans and tomato, and fetched high prices. Thus, it was a “money” tree, and deserved the name “mother’s best friend.”

Sign is, in Trinidad, the common name of the tree whose scientific name is *Moringa oleifera*. Its other common names include: the drumstick tree (its long pods look like drumsticks), horseradish tree the taste of its roots being like that of horseradish), Saigin, in Guyana. It arrived from Santo Domingo (the Dominican Republic) with the name Merengue, which is believed to be a distortion of its technical name *Moringa*. Or, perhaps, the sight of its waving, swirling, flexible branches

in the wind reminded the people of their pride and joy, the merengue dance.

In years gone by when times were really tough in Aruba, fruit-bearing trees like the merengue were brought in to stave off human and animal starvation. But in rosy times, such as the present, friends of the past are discarded. Thus, though the Merengue still struggles to hold its own in Aruba it is doing so only because it refuses to die. It breaks my heart to see its pods black and shriveling in the sun, and it’s bunches of white blossoms begging to be looked at.

So let’s give the tree a fair look.

As Food. Every part of the tree is edible. For centuries it has been the staple diet of peoples in the East and West. Number one on the list of goodies is its long pea-like pods. When young they are cooked in many ways: boiled, stewed with or without meat, or prepared like okra or beans. Its tender leaves and flowers make a tasty and nutritious salad. Every now and then they grace my dishes at lunchtime – a contribution of my boyhood diet, and proof that they might lead to a long healthy life.

Vitamins and Minerals contents. Protein 42%, calcium 125%, magnesium 60%, potassium 41% iron 71%, Vitamin A 27%, vitamin C 22%. Its leaves contain seven times the vitamin C in oranges, four times the calcium in milk, four times Vitamin A in carrots, the



times the protein in milk, three times the potassium in bananas.

Oil Production. The bark, sap, roots, leaves and seeds produce oil which is used for cooking, cosmetics and lubrication.

Water Purifier. In certain parts of India, crushed, dried seeds are used to purify water.

Sexual Dysfunction. In some countries the seeds are believed to be effective in relieving sexual dysfunction in men as in women. Hence, perhaps, the reason why it is popular in Santo Domingo, but frowned upon in Aruba.

The Merengue Tree is, indeed, a “miracle” tree. But look how it has become a nonentity tree in Aruba. My recent survey shows the following:

On my 32 km, 2-hour drive from Barcadera to Tanki Flip and environs I saw only three Merengue trees; one in my orchard, and another at Santa Rosa where I had expected to see many plants on sale. This shows that if the trend is not reversed the tree would soon be lost to Aruba, as has happened on Curacao.

Of five persons I personally interviewed, only one – an elderly woman – knows its name. None had ever eaten any part of the tree.

Therefore, we’d better wake up before it’s too late. Let’s not be lazy or snobbish. Let’s be grateful and dance the Merengue under a Merengue tree.

By Isaac Chin